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Title: Perceptions of Able-Bodied Student Employees of Beckwith Residence Hall: A Qualitative Investigation

About the Author: The researcher for this study is both a PhD student in Community Health as well as a fulltime staff member of the Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES). Due the researcher's continual interests in wanting to remain with a study that was still dedicated to addressing disability as a diversity issue for U of I students with disabilities, another viable research study would involve the investigation of the impacts that students with severe, physical disabilities have on their able-bodied peers. Since the researcher is a fulltime employee with DRES, researching students currently registered for services would create unreliable data outcomes due to both researcher and sampling bias. Students would be inclined to reply in either a favorable or censored manner towards the researcher which would subsequently create inaccurate results and being the researcher would not always allow for data analysis that would be completely free of bias. For example, even if the data collection was compiled in an

anonymous manner it is still possible to figure out the identities of the subjects based solely on how they respond, due to having the ability to work with the same students on a consistent basis. While data collection targeting students with disabilities may be acceptable for program evaluation purposes, it would not be suitable for research purposes. By virtue of being an administrator at DRES, there was still a possibility of subject bias, however this researcher rarely, if ever knows the identities of the Beckwith Hall student employees and they seldom ever have a reason to meet other DRES staff beyond the three current Beckwith staff members.

Throughout all email correspondence to the Beckwith student employee list soliciting volunteers for this study, the primary researcher introduced herself as a PhD student in Community Health; however the employment status of the primary researcher was not kept from the student employees during the initial contacts as the signature line on all email correspondence indicated the researcher's status with DRES. Overall, the response from student employees at Beckwith Residence Hall was

positive, and the student employees articulated their appreciation that their own development and voice as a student employee was being investigated. Based on the assessment of body language and non-verbal behaviors during all 7 interviews, students appeared to have responded with comfort and ease with each of the questions.

Keywords: college students with physical disabilities, disability perceptions, social inclusion

Abstract: In 1959, the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign became the first post-secondary institution in the world to create a transitional living program for students with severe, physical disabilities needing assistance in the performance of activities of daily living (ADL's) such as restroom assistance, dressing, and bathing (Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services, 2009). Today, U of I students with severe, physical disabilities residing at Beckwith Residence Hall continue to receive ADL assistance primarily by other currently enrolled University of Illinois student peers, rather than through community-based home healthcare agencies serviced by local nursing aids. By researching the relationships between able-bodied students and students with severe, physical disabilities, such information may provide further insight towards greater social inclusivity for people with disabilities society-wide.

Initial Exercises:

Question: To date, research addressing the PA experience of U of I students and the social impacts of their immersion and exposure to other student peers with severe, physical disabilities has not been investigated. What kind of social impact does employment at Beckwith Hall have on able-bodied, U of I student PA's working with U of I students with severe, physical disabilities? Are there socialization patterns that develop with students beyond PA employment responsibilities?

Plan: Week 6: February 22-28
Monday, February 23 – **Research Proposal Due**

All week – Research articles for Literature Review

Week 7: March 1-7

Tuesday, March 3 – Begin working on seeking proper IRB/Human

Subjects review approval

Friday, March 6 – Finalize paperwork / online forms for proper IRB/Human

Subjects review approval

Monday, March 2-Wednesday, March 4 – Continue searching for research articles for Literature Review

Week 8: March 8-14

All week –Begin to synthesize research articles identified for Literature Review

Week 9: March 15-21

Monday, March 16 – **Literature Review Due**

Tuesday, March 17 – IRB Approval should be approved

Thursday, March 19 or Friday, March 20 – Begin Collecting

Data

Week 10: March 22-28

All week – Data Collection

Week 11: March 29 – April 4

All week – Data Collection

Week 12: April 5-11

All week – Data Collection

Week 13: April 12-18

All week – Data Collection

Week 14: April 19-25

All week – Data Collection - Finish

Week 15: April 26 – May 2

All week – Work on Final Paper Draft

Week 16: May 3-9

All week – Work on Final Paper Draft

Week 17: May 10-16

Monday, May 11 – **Final Paper Due**

Data: A total of 10 (4 males and 6 females) Beckwith student employees offered their assistance for this study, however due to scheduling conflicts and timing, the final sample consisted of a total of 7 current Beckwith student employees (5 females and 2 males) for this study. Currently, there are a total of 76 Personal Assistants (24 males and 54 females) who are employed by Beckwith Hall. Proportionally, the ratio of just over a 2:1 females to males in the sample may possibly be due to factors that are reflected in the literature (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Jones & Stone, 1995) that states able-bodied women tend to be more accepting of visible, physical disabilities when compared to men, and statistically tend to have higher volunteer rates for studies regarding measurement of perceptions towards those with disabilities (Olkin & Howson, 1994). Our first participant identified as Black/African American/Non-Hispanic female

who is 24 years old and a recent graduate (May 2008) of the university in Rhetoric/Creative writing and was employed by Beckwith Hall as a personal assistant (PA) who lived elsewhere on or around campus. The second participant identified as a White, Non-Hispanic, female who is 21 years of age, a senior in Biochemistry, and is currently employed by Beckwith Hall as PA who lives elsewhere on or around campus as well as a Floater and Meal Assistant. Our third participant is identified as a White, Non-Hispanic, female who is 24 years of age, is a graduate student in the Doctor of Audiology (AuD) program, and is a resident advisor (RA) for Beckwith Hall. The fourth participant 4 identified as an Asian or Pacific Islander male who is 21 years old, is a junior majoring in Spanish, and is currently employed as a PA who lives elsewhere on or around campus. Our fifth participant identified as a White, Non-Hispanic male who is 20 years old, is a junior in Kinesiology, and is a PA who lives elsewhere on or around campus. Participant six identified as a White, Non-Hispanic female who is 19 years old, a sophomore in Molecular and Cellular Biology (MCB),

and is a live-in PA at Beckwith Hall. Finally, participant seven identified as a White, Non-Hispanic female who is 22 years old, also an MCB major, and has served as a PA, Floater, and Meal Assistant at Beckwith Hall. There are approximately a total of 14 years of combined experience between the research participants, 2 participants each have almost 1 academic year³ of experience, 3 participants each have almost 2 academic years of experience, and 2 participants have almost 3 academic years of work experience through Beckwith Hall.

The majority (5 out of 7) participants had previous experience caring for or volunteering in their home communities with either children with disabilities or individuals from the aging population. Only one participant in this study had actually interacted with peers (rather than young children or the aging population) who had a visible disability. Despite the University of Illinois' 60+ year history of enrolling qualified students with visible disabilities, there are still a substantial number of students, faculty/staff, and other university community members who are unaware of the history of disability services on

campus. When each of the 7 participants were asked whether or not they noticed students with visible disabilities (i.e. wheelchair users) on campus prior to working at Beckwith Residence Hall, 5 out of 7 participants stated they noticed students with visible disabilities, but did not know any of them personally. Therefore, campus leaders and policy makers should not expect to improve campus diversity climate only through structural diversity (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Just two participants had no awareness of students with visible disabilities on campus until they learned of Beckwith's student employment opportunities and began employment at Beckwith Hall, and one of these participants completed her undergraduate studies at another institution and immediately began her student employment at Beckwith her first semester at Illinois.

All research participants had made a connection between their experiences working at Beckwith Hall and their future career goals. Each participant anticipated that their work experiences at Beckwith Hall would further develop their knowledge and skill development as well as

help them to fulfill their current career goals that they are pursuing after graduation from the University of Illinois. All participants deemed their Beckwith experiences as a critical aspect of their learning for their chosen career paths, as students had expressed aspirations of careers in medicine, clinical audiology, and social work. For one participant, he reported that working at Beckwith Hall actually counted towards patient contact hours that were required for applying to physician's assistant school. For another participant, she had articulated that she was initially focused on becoming a pediatrician, but after working at Beckwith Hall, she has begun to consider changing her focus to either neurology or rehabilitation medicine, which are fields of medicine she had not considered or anticipated having an interest in beforehand. Therefore, this participant's work experiences at Beckwith are actually helping her to formulate and further develop her career aspirations and identity.

While both student employees and student residents are cautioned by the Beckwith administrative staff about

the decision to both hire **and** socialize with their student PAs, one participant articulated her challenges with this dual role by stating, “You do such intimate tasks with them you can’t not be their friend or not get close to them, that’s one of the things I really like about the job, it’s also one of the really challenging things about the job.” A total of 6 out of 7 participants disclosed that they socialized with Beckwith residents outside of student employment responsibilities through the quantitative portion of the survey tool. However, the one participant who did not disclose that he socialized with Beckwith residents in the initial quantitative data collection actually revealed in his one-on-one interview that he saw Beckwith residents as, “People like I can go hang out with, go to the movies with and stuff.” A total of 4 participants explicitly referred to Beckwith residents as “friends” or having the capacity for establishing a “friendship.” The manner in which student employees and Beckwith residents socialize with each other is indicative with how any other student on campus socializes. The most popular means for socializing outside of PA responsibilities was by Facebook or email,

the second most popular means was through text messaging and cell phone communication, the third means of socialization had a 4-way tie between eating meals outside of Beckwith Hall, taking trips to campustown, going to movies, and attending campus or community-related events (sports, concerts, festivals).

Throughout the study, the Beckwith student employees exhibited behaviors that were indicative of greater equality in how they viewed the students with disabilities who employed them. Greater equality in this study not only includes elements of social inclusivity but it also incorporates behaviors that exhibit interdependence. Interdependence occurs because each individual views the other as having valuable contributions and resources as well as equal capabilities for personal responsibility. For example, one participant had questions and concerns regarding her role as a PA at Beckwith Hall and felt that her questions could be best addressed by an actual upperclassman, who once resided at Beckwith, but has now transitioned to graduate housing. Elements of interdependence are present as our able-bodied student

employee had actively pursued the insight of a Beckwith alum as she thought of her as a credible source. Another aspect of interdependence involves personal responsibility. Another common example that Beckwith student PAs encounter is when another student who did not schedule their PAs appropriately ahead of time asks a PA who is already there working with another resident to fill in at the last second. One participant states, "It is really hard to learn how to say no, but just because you don't have class (directly after your shift) doesn't mean you don't have other responsibilities and other things to do." By valuing one's own time exhibits interdependence as well, since this participant sees her Beckwith peers as equally capable for personal responsibility. Finally, one student PA had expressed his frustrations with the fact that Beckwith students who do go to the campustown bars are not typically asked to pay the cover charge and that they themselves do not question it. On one hand, he considered the campustown establishments as ignorant, as he believes that it is not that there is an unspoken rule to not charge wheelchair users cover, it is that the bar staff

does not even know that they have a right to ask in the first place. On the other hand, he stated that while Beckwith students oftentimes express their concerns about being treated equally, they also complain when they are required to follow rules that everybody must follow, such as paying cover charge to the campustown establishments.

A fourth recurring theme across participants indicated that their work experiences had a direct impact on their overall behaviors and perceptions outside of / away from Beckwith Hall. For two participants, they now both find themselves evaluating buildings and public areas in other cities that they visit to see if the material / physical landscape is accessible to wheelchairs. Prior to their experiences working at Beckwith Hall, both reported that the attention to their immediate environments is an outcome of their employment. One participant stated, “I know in the future if and when I build a house, I plan on making it accessible just because it’s easier for me to lift stuff in and out but also if any of my friends want to come over.” Participants have also been frequently known to come back to Beckwith Hall and have students from their

social circles and majors accompany them to get to know the residents as well. For one participant, she feels compelled to educate as many students as possible that she sees on campus, regarding both the social and employment opportunities available through Beckwith Residence Hall. She states,

“I just really wish that people outside, the rest of the students on campus, would view people with physical disabilities the same way that people who work at Beckwith do. And I think that by working here and talking to people outside that I have kind of helped to at least let some other people who weren't exposed before have a view of what I see.”

Discuss: Amsel and Fichten (1988) believed that behavior change should be measured by evaluating the ratio of positive to negative thoughts rather than the frequency of affirmative thought(s). The ratio approach provides a more effective assessment of attitudinal change with time. As previously mentioned, impacting attitudes towards change requires longer term opportunities for

interaction. The presence of judgment and anxiety is part of being human, and teaching about empathy as well as thinking outside of one's experiences takes time before change will occur (Khuri, personal communication, 2009).

As previously mentioned in the literature, attitudes regarding disability are multidimensional, and are found to vary depending upon the context one is placed in as well as the type of disability one is referring to (Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, Sabourin, & Wright, 1997; Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, & Tagalakakis, 1991; Golstein & Johnson, 1997; Gordon, Minnes, & Holden, 1990; Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; and Strohmer, Sheldon, & Purcell, 1984). Therefore, the ratio of positive to negative thoughts provides an evaluative measure that is sensitive and more developmental in nature, and subsequently can be incorporated into a multitude of diverse situations. Therefore, measuring/assessing complex perceptions such as able-bodied attitudes toward disabilities can be achieved. For example, one participant had expressed a few concerning responses during the one-on-one interview. On two separate questions, she

focused on what students “can’t do,” and how she was going to try to “fix” situations “for” rather than “with” students. Upon initial review of this participant’s responses, it appeared that she had a very limited understanding of students with disabilities in the year she had served as a meal assistant, PA, and floater. However, evaluating this participant’s learning based on a ratio approach rather than evaluating her on the number of times she used disability–first language is a more appropriate and accurate means for evaluating her overall learning and development.

For much of the existing literature, individuals with disabilities were viewed negatively by those who are able-bodied (Fichten & Amsel, 1988; Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, Sabourin, & Wright, 1997; Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, & Tagalakakis, 1991; Fichten, Robillard, Tagalakakis, & Amsel, 1991; Golstein & Johnson, 1997; Jones & Stone, 1995; Olkin & Howson, 1994; and Stovall & Sedlacek, 1983). The literature indicates that continual contact and interaction at the societal level is not happening as even for those who may be opened to interacting and learning

more about individuals with visible disabilities, this study's participants had initial reservations on the feasibility of becoming a successful Beckwith student employee. Throughout the student interviews, four of the participants explicitly articulated that they initially had levels emotional struggle and questioned their decisions to become Beckwith employees. For one participant, she stated she thought she understood the roles and responsibilities of her new position as a resident advisor (RA), however she admitted to having struggles in the beginning. She revealed:

“It was really hard for me to work here in the beginning. I mean I knew what I was getting into but at the same time it was emotionally difficult because I felt sympathetic to some of the cases here especially for the resident that lives next door to me. He had a fairly new injury and so in talking with him the first few weeks of school, I really think it kind of opened my eyes to what it was like to live life with a physical disability”

The other three participants, who openly disclosed they had initial levels of uncertainty, stated that in the beginning they also questioned their actual potential and abilities in becoming effective PAs. Prior to the start of her employment, one participant anticipated that Beckwith Hall was going to be more “nursing home-ish,” but she stated she was very surprised and reassured on her first day of work to see that Beckwith Hall looked similar to her own residence hall on campus.

Additionally, increased awareness in the everyday aspects of disability will most often result in greater empathic awareness. An explanation articulated by another participant related to how his experiences working at Beckwith Hall required skills that he believed could never be taught from a textbook. This participant stated, “You just learn a lot of things that you wouldn’t learn otherwise, it took me helping someone and experiencing it firsthand, this is way different than knowing from a textbook.” Such insight from our participant is indicative of what Lutz and Bowers (2005) conveyed and argued regarding the current theoretical models of

disability. Because Lutz and Bowers (2005) believed that the everyday experience of disability is absent from the current models trying to explain disability, and consequently one cannot accurately portray it, as the condition and not the experience of disability, remains the central focus.

The outcomes of the Beckwith student employment study indicate that longer term interactions between able-bodied individuals and individuals with disabilities, dispelled the outcomes of what the literature currently states. For example, the novelty of disability leading to social discomfort that was noted in Fichten, Amsel, Robillard, Sabourin, & Wright's (1997) research, diminished for individuals in our study who experienced longer term, sustained relationships with individuals with visible, physical disabilities. Fichten, Amsel, & Robillard's (1991) research of perceptions between able-bodied college students and college students with disabilities is also found to become dispelled from our findings. Again, due to the long-term, ongoing contact and interactions that Beckwith student employees had with

other college students with disabilities, they are able to formulate meaningful relationships that extend beyond a “helping” relationship. Therefore, students with disabilities do not necessarily see themselves as being solely judged based on their functional limitations. Finally, individuals with disabilities were found to be deemed more accepted in more formal environments such as workplace or academic situations but less likely to be included in social situations (Hergenrather & Rhodes, 2007; Olkin & Howson, 1994; and Stovall & Sedlacek, 1983). However, outcomes clearly indicate that socialization between able-bodied students and students with disabilities occur outside of structured environments such as academic settings.

EUI Links:

Reflect: The protocol for data collection involved surveying a sample of current Beckwith Hall student employees. Dr. Pat Malik, the Director of Beckwith Residence Hall, was notified to seek approval for this study, and agreed to send out an email notification to the student employee list serve requesting for them to come forward and participate in this

study on a voluntary basis upon receipt of the proper research consent forms through the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI). Each student employee participant was provided with the option to be surveyed and interviewed at Beckwith Residence Hall during scheduled times that were compatible with their employment hours at the facility, or at any convenient location on campus that was suitable with their schedules. Prior to beginning data collection, all Beckwith student employee participants were required to be 18 years of age and sign the proper EUI research consent form. One-on-one interviews were conducted with each Beckwith student employee to get their nonverbal expressions, which is deemed important contextual information for this particular study (Appendix A). A digital recorder was also utilized so that the option to transcribe each individual interview for later synthesis of content and to also allow the opportunity to pay closer attention to their nonverbal cues. All recorded auditory data was destroyed once the final analysis and report was completed. The Beckwith student employees were described according to

demographics (gender, age, race/ethnicity, Beckwith student employee role) to provide the reader a perspective on the demographics of the participants, and were referred to as "Participant 1, 2, 3, etc." When directly quoted, Beckwith student employees were either referred to simply as a "participant" or by the type of student employee role they had, and the identities of the current Beckwith residents who employed by them were kept anonymous if they were referred to in any way in the data collection process.

Recommendations: According to Strohmer, Grand, & Purcell (1984) the extent of contact with persons with a disability is the most important factor associated with more favorable attitudes. Do such favorable attitudes sustain themselves over the course of time? Future research including former Beckwith student employees who are now alumni would allow for the investigation of whether the relationships that developed at Beckwith Hall have continued on beyond campus. Additionally, how and whether alums view disability in relation to their everyday lives would provide additional perspectives on how thoughts or perceptions of disability have remained or changed over time. Such information would provide a longitudinal perspective of how Beckwith employment experiences have had an impact on former students.